

Media Determinism and the Social Design of Web Based Computing

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ABSTRACT

New information technologies, and the ongoing digitalization of different media forms have intensified questions about the effect of media upon social life. From as early as the Ancient transposition of speech into writing, critics have maintained that *media has a determining effect upon culture*. This project does not seek to endorse or reject or reshape this thesis in relation to any particular medium or historical epoch. Instead, I hope to reframe the debate by doing a survey of the different arguments about the ways media shapes culture, organize an archive of those positions, and then do a conceptual topology of those arguments. By using a team of graduate students to gather together the many ways media determinism has been thought—about different media, in different media, and within very different epochs—the project will seek a fresh cross disciplinary perspective upon an age-old issue. It is hoped that this study will enable me to understand the role of the media determinism thesis within a culture's complex "negotiation" with the new media technologies. More specifically and urgently, it will develop terms with which to challenge those who use arguments about media determinism (whether it is supposed to be for good or ill) to win the authority, outside any political negotiation, to shape the global information network and computing interfaces.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Background: Since Plato's attack upon writing for its deleterious effect on memory, critics have been speculating about the influence of new media on human culture. I have studied this issue closely in relation to the 18th century novel, especially around the debates about the dangerous effects

of absorptive, solitary novel reading upon young women and men in the 18th century. What do I mean by "media determinism?" I refer to the thesis that changes in media have a determining effect upon culture. The most popular proponent of this thesis in the mid 20th century was Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan liked to compare changes in media to changes in the global living environment: both require adaptation by those who would survive. The more patient and systematic historians and media theorists who have worked in the wake of his theories have offered many different ways to extend or contest the media determinism thesis. Thus, some historians have demonstrated the way the movement from manuscript to print is the condition of the possibility of the protestant reformation and the scientific revolution. (J. Goody, E. Eisenstein) Historians and theorists have contested media determinism in several different ways: by laying bare the arbitrary choices the lie behind the institution of new media forms (from the newspaper and radio, to television and the Internet); by insisting upon the active constitutive role of culture before, during and after the institution of new media; by aligning the media determinism thesis with the self-interested owners of new media. (D. Czitrom, M. Warner, M Crispin Miller, S. Hall) The "media determinism" thesis has some of the inevitable and irresolvable character of what used, in the hey-day of post-structuralism, to be called a "problematic": some sort of conceptual resolution of the thesis depends upon achieving consensus upon the three terms of the thesis, "media" "determines" "culture." But, even if one could achieve consensus upon the meaning of these terms, and there is little sign of this happening, new media technologies come along to upset the old consensus. Perhaps like the debate about nature versus nurture, the "media determinism" thesis seems deeply lodged within our culture as one of the main ways we make sense of change in the modern period. But it is also fraught with political import. When the US Congress passed the Communications Decency Act, it did so in the name of protecting children from the deleterious effect of web based pornography.

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RECENTLY COMPLETED PROJECT

My research on the 18th century print media cultures suggested another way to approach this question. In my research on the 18th century novel I found that the point was not to **decide** who was “right” or “wrong” when it came to media determinism, but instead to understand how the terms and forms of those debates comes to structure the media forms and practices developed in their wake. Thus for example, media workers like Defoe, Richardson and Fielding took note of the astonishing popularity of the short, plot-centered novels of amorous intrigue, and sought to exploit this new vogue for silent absorptive reading for entertainment. By embedding elements of these short sexy novels in their own writing, they developed an enlightened and morally improving alternative to the arousing popular fiction of Behn, Manley and Haywood. To put it into modern terms: by rewriting the software circulating on the network of early modern print entertainment, they not only expanded and diversified the **media content** on that network, they enabled an **expansion of the network of print media culture**. Novels became the dominant artistic print form of the 19th and 20th century.

CURRENT PROJECT

I doing a broad survey of the various ways critics, scholars, social scientists and Sunday supplement moralists have hailed the arrival, or sounded the alarm, of new media. My historical research has convinced me that it is the assumption (or worry) that “media determines culture” that inflects debates about censorship, copyright, privacy, and many of the other issues of media policy receiving renewed scrutiny in an age of the rapid expansion of digital media. In envision two steps to this process.

- 1) Survey: I will guide research assistants in doing a selective survey of a broad range of material developing some form of the media determinism thesis: early criticism of writing and print; acts of censorship (e.g. the Catholic Inquisition; political censorship); early cultural criticism (18th and 19th century writing about reading); major newspapers (e.g. debate about whether television heralds a new level of civic participation); TV news and commentary (e.g. debate about the V-Chip and film and TV ratings); from popular to academic concern about violence in the media (from Sunday Supplement essays to study like the National Television Violence Study (UCSB)).
- 2) Topology and Web authoring. Through a comparative analysis of the heterogeneous materials collected, I hope to develop a systematic topology of the different forms of the media determinism thesis. In other words, across different media, historical epochs and cultures, I suspect that there are a discrete number of ways to argue “media (does or does not) determines culture”. Through the use of the enhanced computing facilities of the

Transcriptions studio, I plan to work with graduate research assistants to shape an archive of print and on-line texts and images into a suite of web pages on the topic of media determinism.

BRIEF DISCUSSION

This project will build upon the way humanists and theorists have thought about these questions, but it will seek to go beyond those paradigms and become multi-disciplinary. Thus, for example, I teaming up with graduate students from several disciplines, so as to take advantage of their diverse expertise (from Medieval studies to Communications). In addition to the historical and contemporary material investigated, I would like to include detailed critical analysis of studies now being conducted within the social sciences on the influence upon children of “violence in the media.” Within this huge terrain of study, there are two ways I narrow my focus. First, I will be focusing upon those media central to narrative entertainment and narrative art: writing, print, film, television and the world wide web; secondly, I will be paying attention to those critical epochs when a new medium is undergoing institutionalization (e.g. the early 20th century invention of narrative cinema; the mid 20th century arrival of TV; the arrival of the WWW in the last 6 years of the 20th century.) It is then that the most is promised and the most is dreaded with each of these media, and it is in the inaugural years of a new medium that the thesis that the media determines culture intensified expression. By bringing understanding the media determinism thesis over a broad arc of media history, I hope to inflect the current debates raging about the social design of the Internet. An understanding of the rhetorical motives and concrete effects of the media determinism thesis will give us a fuller grasp of the implications of those arguments now being made at this moment—for example in the legal struggles around Napster and copyright—about how we should design software, hardware, and the law so web based computing can provide a socially accessible, culturally open and political progressive media sphere.

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